

Tsong Khapa was born to a nomad family in 1358, and his legendary birthplace is now the centre of the Kumbum monastery. According to legend, a great tree that bore mystic symbols or Tibetan letters on the bark and leaves had sprung from the spot where his mother had shed the blood of birth. The tree was investigated in the mid nineteenth century by the Lazarist priest Abbé Huc who, although sceptical, could offer no explanation for this highly unusual phenomenon. The tree (or at least the remains of it) was later housed in a silver *chörten*. As a boy, Tsong Khapa begged to be given the vows of monkhood. A visiting priest cut his hair as a sign of renunciation of the world. According to another legend, a juniper tree smelling of human hair grew on the spot where his hair fell to the ground. Thubten Jigme Norbu, the current Dalai Lama's older brother, who was born nearby and became the abbot of Kumbum, remembered this tree and its unusual smell. He also remembered the thousands of monks who once lived and studied here. The monastery was closed by the Chinese between 1967 and 1979, and the monks were either imprisoned or banished; it is now reckoned (1987) that about four hundred monks had been allowed back.



*Chörtens at Kumbum monastery*

The first thing that Daniel and I want to do is to find accommodation in the monastery. There is a small hotel nearby, but this does not seem to be anything like the converted monks' cells that I have read about in my guide book. I go off in search of the cells and, in doing so, walk into a temple that is just being closed to visitors. I quickly walk around an impressive *chörten* (could this be the one housing the tree, I wonder?), examine some of the complex and then decide to rejoin Daniel. I find him and Master Past Tense at the entrance of the hotel, which we finally conclude must

lead to the monks' cells. When I find myself looking into a delightful monastic courtyard, I realize that we are at the right place after all. Ignoring the Chinese lad's warning that accommodation here is too expensive at 7 yuan a night, we go into a little booking office. A jolly Tibetan man invites us to sit on a couch and with a great deal of laughter transcribes the details of our completed forms into his book. We immediately feel at home and are delighted to be so pleasantly received.

Another grinning Tibetan shows us upstairs to a balcony and into a basic but neat little bedroom. We are now in a totally different world, for here it is quiet and peaceful. The architecture, which is predominately Chinese, is very pleasing; other parts of the building and the wooden pillars outside are painted a shiny vermillion. A young English couple from the room beside ours advise us to walk around the nearby hills in the evening to see the setting sun.

By now I feel filthy and in need of a shower, but no such facility exists here. We realize that keeping ourselves clean will be a challenge from now on.

As it has turned pleasantly cool by now, Daniel and I decide to take a walk and eat later. As we set off and skirt the monastic buildings, we begin to realize just how big and impressive Kumbum actually is. Now and then a cheerful monk passes us, and we see locals – possibly nomads – dressed in quite extraordinary and colourful clothing. Earlier we had noticed quite a number of Muslims in their distinctive dress: men with white cloth caps and women with black headscarves fastened over white caps.



*Part of the monastic complex, Kumbum*

Following a path, we climb gradually to the rounded green hills that encircle the monastery and, passing a military barracks (a strange and rather sinister intrusion), turn to the right. Here we are rewarded with a dramatic view looking down over the extensive monastic complex. What appear to be ruins at first sight turn out to be plain mud-brick houses built for accommodating the monks. Viewed from the outside they are uninspiring, though their inner courtyards look colourful and tidy.

Beyond stretches the ugly Chinese town: a real eyesore in an otherwise wonderful landscape.

We continue our walk along the path and stop to examine a small monk's cell cut into the hillside. The entrance is half bricked up and inside can be glimpsed photographs of the Dalai Lama.

We now veer to the left and then, rounding a hill, leave the town behind and see the setting sun gradually disappearing behind a ragged ridge of high mountains in the distance. I wish that I had brought my camera, for the evening light is very atmospheric.

As it has now turned quite cool, we return to our quarters and investigate the little restaurant nearby. We are invited into a kitchen by the Muslim chef so that we can choose what we want to eat. Our meal, which is good, is washed down with *long yan cha*, 'dragon's eye tea': a refreshing mixture of tea, rock crystal sugar and a small fruit (the *long yan*), which is not unlike a lychee. We are ready for bed afterwards, for we are tired. It has been a rather frustrating day, during which too much time had been wasted in Xining. We hope that the Chinese fellow will have our tickets tomorrow. However, we are delighted to be here in this peaceful place. For the first time ever in China we experience complete silence during the night.

At about 5 a.m. the sound of a high-pitched trumpet being blown over a long period of time, with the same note repeated endlessly, wakes me from a deep sleep. This, I conclude, must be the call to prayer. Later a drum is beaten rapidly. I want to investigate, but stay put as I assume that it is too cold outside, and I do not want to disturb Daniel, who is still sleeping. However, curiosity finally gets the better of me and I rise when dawn is breaking.



*Kumbum, early morning*

I creep out and stroll around the complex. At this hour the light is wonderful and the atmosphere magical. There are no tourists (apart from myself) – just the monks and the locals. Sunlight filters through the trees; I snap some photos of the buildings.



When I hear chanting and drum beating, I creep into one of the temples to investigate. I pass through some wonderfully intimate courtyards and suddenly find myself in a *dukhang*, filled with chanting red-robed monks. There must be some two hundred of them; the whole assembly hall is bathed in the warm glow of countless butter lamps. I am greeted by the familiar smells of warm butter and wood. As I enter, some young novices bearing huge teapots rush out and, inside, the monks noisily slurp their *solja* (battered tea) and giggle at me. The abbot then resumes the chanting and they are off again. Here they do not chant in the low-pitched voices that I have heard in Ladakh and Bhutan; one monk has a particularly high voice that stands out from the rest and is completely out of tune. At one point a senior monk checks a group of young novices who are laughing uncontrollably at me.

I sit in a corner, cross-legged, drinking in the scene, then walk around the periphery of the hall, examining the books and statues. I feel quite at home in this environment and am astonished to realize that I am actually in The People's Republic of China. Although the monastery is only a shadow of its former self, it is heartening to discover that these monks are now being allowed to practise their religion and carry on with the old traditions, even if it is just a façade for tourists like me.

I leave and wander out to the courtyard, which I photograph. Just as I am about to take another picture, a monk appears and stops me. I put the camera away, realizing that I must be more discreet.



*Kumbum temples*

I continue on my way, stopping now and then to observe and photograph. I peep into courtyards and slowly make my way up towards the hills. Suddenly Daniel is beside me. We continue walking and turn left at the barracks, which I photograph from a distance. This path, which we did not explore yesterday, offers a splendid view of the whole monastic complex. A couple of monks appear and laughingly ask



us to photograph them. We are happy to oblige, as we both want to take pictures of them.



*Monks at Kumbum*

We now retrace our steps. By the time we reach our quarters, the tourist stalls are being erected and the place is losing its magic. After I have put a new film into my camera, we set off with the couple from the room beside us, and walk down the main street. As we are approached by a fellow who offers to change money, I decide to take him up on his offer and change some FECs into RMB at a good rate.

Daniel and I then decide to explore an area of the town that we have not yet seen. We turn right at the entrance to the monastery and amble uphill, where we find ourselves among square mud-brick houses inhabited mostly by members of the Muslim Hui community. Children run out to look at us and cry excitedly, 'Hallo!' and 'Bye-bye!'. I stop to photograph a pretty garden through the doorway of a house. While putting the camera away, two Muslim men, both bearded, and both dressed in dark blue clothing and wearing white caps, appear and beckon us to enter. This we do, and find ourselves in an intimate courtyard of a simple dwelling. The two men courteously shake hands with us and invite us to sit down at a table in the shade. Cups are produced and the woman of the house appears with a pot of weak, milky tea flavoured with salt, which she pours into our cups; the men drink Chinese green tea. We are offered bread and sunflower seeds; as I cannot manage the seeds, I help myself to some of the bread, which is delicious. The tea is pleasantly refreshing.

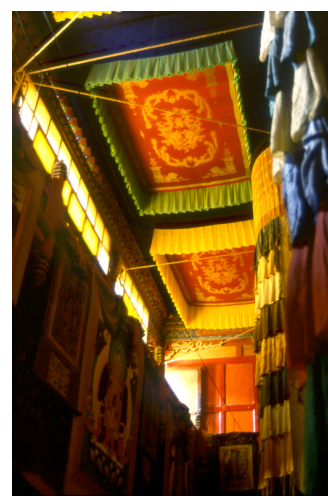
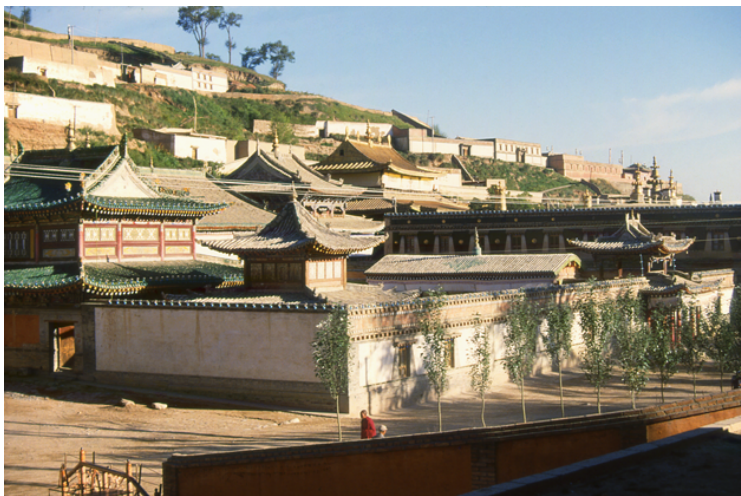
Conversation with our kind hosts is very limited; we can barely understand their dialect of Chinese and I do not have my phrasebook handy. The two men speak in their own language to each other. However, their friendliness and goodwill make up for the lack of conversation, and it feels nice to relax with them in their own home. Later they ask us to photograph them. They make a great show of preparing themselves and posing. We indicate that if they write down their address for us, we will post them the photo.



*Muslims in Huangzhong*

Just as we are about to leave, a woman appears with a big dish of vegetables. We are invited to sit down again and help ourselves. As Daniel's stomach has been causing him some trouble this morning, he goes easy on the vegetables, but because they are tasty, I eat a good portion. We relax afterwards and chat to each other in our own languages. A little while later, a young man who speaks standard Mandarin Chinese appears and we are able to converse a little easier. He disappears and gets somebody to write the address of the house on a piece of paper for us. Before we finally leave, we take some more photos, including one of a younger man and his baby son. I wash my hands with a little water from a jug and we depart, shaking hands once again. It has been a wonderful interlude.

We now make our way back to the monastery, where I leave Daniel and go walking again in the hills. I find a path that I have been searching for and amble around, stopping now and then to photograph various views of the buildings below and the mountains in the distance. I return and manage to slip into some of the temples without buying a ticket.



*Monastic buildings, Kumbum, and an interior*



*Tibetan woman in traditional dress*

Feeling that I have now seen the place to my satisfaction, I return to our quarters, where I find a Tibetan woman – probably a nomad from Eastern Tibet – donning an elaborate costume in the courtyard. Because I am so taken by her colourful clothing and hair twisted into 108 narrow braids (a sacred number), I take a photograph of her from the balcony. I then join Daniel, pack up, and we leave soon after three o'clock. I am quite reluctant to go; I would quite happily have stayed another day.

We foot it to the bus station and, after failing to buy a ticket because of the unruly scrum in the ticket office, we follow the advice of a woman and jump on the next available bus without paying. As it is packed, I have to stand for the forty-five minute journey.

Back in grimy Xining we take another bus to the train station and check in to the nearby hotel for the night. A surly woman brings us to our room and unlocks the door. The place is like a cross between a hospital and prison; as we soon discover, it is run with prison-like discipline. After we have spruced ourselves up, we go down to the entrance and wait for the Chinese fellow who has promised to buy us the train tickets. Unsurprisingly, he does not turn up. Daniel goes off to look elsewhere, returns and shows the fellow's business card to somebody. A man recognizes the name and asks Daniel to come with him. I stay put and, because I am hungry, decide to eat in the foyer. For one yuan I am given a bowl of rice, meat and vegetables, followed by a bowl of soup. Daniel returns as I am finishing. He tells me that he was brought to the tourist office, where he once again produced the card. The manager identified it as his own. As he could only speak very little English, communication had been difficult between him and Daniel. It seemed that no train tickets were available for tomorrow and that we would have to travel on the following day. Daniel has now returned to see what I want to do.

Together we return to the tourist office, where we are invited to sit down. After a lot of talk, misunderstandings and mistranslations, we learn that there are hard seats on a train only tomorrow and perhaps hard sleepers the following day. I enquire about a bus. Yes, we are told, there will be a bus tomorrow. I ask if we can buy tickets now and a young lady goes off to see if she can get her hands on a couple.



She returns and asks us for twenty-five yuan each. Just as we are taking out the money, somebody else comes in to tell us that there will be no seats on tomorrow's bus. The manager makes a gesture indicating that we should hold on to our money and an urgent discussion takes place. At this stage Daniel and I begin to laugh – there is no point in getting upset. Finally we are offered possible hard sleepers or definite hard seats on the train leaving the day after tomorrow, or the bus. As we are in no mood for a long journey sitting on hard seats, we opt for the bus. We give fifty yuan to the young lady, who tells us that she will buy the tickets the following morning and will have them for us by the afternoon.

Reasonably satisfied, we return to the hotel, where I luxuriate in a welcome shower. In the evening an American chap enters in and asks if the third bed is free. As it is, he takes it and sits down to talk to us. He speaks Chinese quite fluently, has been travelling for quite some time and is able to give us a lot of useful information. I leave briefly to use the bathroom; when I return, I learn that the Chinese fellow from the tourist office called to say that he had missed us earlier (an unlikely story), that he had bought train tickets for tomorrow and that he had given them to somebody else rather than be stuck with them (also very unlikely). He now produces hard sleeper tickets for the day after tomorrow. Daniel accepts these in preference to the bus and tells the fellow to go back to the tourist office and use the fifty yuan RMB that we have paid for the bus journey. In this way it will be cheaper for us (the fellow had demanded FEC) and he will lose his profit because of the bungling. The result of all this is that we will have to waste time tomorrow in Xining, as it is not worth all the bother of returning to Kumbum. It is such a pity that we will have to stay overnight in this dump as the staff are so rude and there is so much noise in the corridors, with people constantly shouting and slamming doors.



*Daniel and the author in the station hotel, Xining*

On the following morning, the bedroom door is flung open and a bucket is kicked into the room shortly after I wake. It is the cleaning lady. After a short pause, the door is slammed shut. By this time our American companion has left. As we have

nothing in particular to do and are not in a rush, we take our time. We breakfast outdoors at a stall that serves Muslim food: a round piece of chewy white bread and soup containing uneatable rubbery white meat. In a nearby shop we buy provisions for Lhasa: biscuits, tea and some water bottles. Back in our dreadful hotel I write my diary and Daniel reads.

At lunchtime we eat in our local restaurant, where we have a basic meal while listening to the same noisy Chinese pop music that we had heard yesterday – it seems as if they only have one tape. Afterwards we return to our prison cell, where I have a siesta. I wake feeling refreshed and open the window to let in some air. During the short space of time in which I leave the room and return, a member of the staff walks in, waking Daniel in the process, and slams the window shut. I return to my diary and later send off some postcards that I have written.



*A Hui Muslim, Xining*

We have a simple and cheap evening meal in the hotel lobby and afterwards go walking in the town. Now that the light is pleasant and it is cooler, the place looks so much better. We stop many times to photograph the people – the Han (the native Chinese), the Hui (the Muslims) and the Tibetans. We walk as far as a large, ugly mosque and return, via a different route, to our dismal lodgings. Back in our room we have another companion this evening: an American who is pleasantly chatty and interesting. We retire to bed early and I grope outside the door in order to turn the lights out. Instructions are barked at me by a woman until I finally locate the piece of string that serves as a switch. I am puzzled as to why switches in hotels like these are outside the bedrooms and not inside.

Off to Golmud today – the city in Qinghai province from which we plan to catch a bus to Lhasa. After little or no sleep, there is a knock on our door at 6.15 a.m. – it is our Chinese friend. Fortunately he has not let us down this time. We creep out of our room and the three of us leave the hotel and enter the station. Only when we are on the platform waiting for the train do we discover that our Chinese companion is travelling with us for part of the journey.

The train draws in soon after seven o'clock and we wait for the carriage door to open. Despite the fact that we are beyond any doubt first in the queue, several Chinese people try to barge in first, only to be pushed back roughly by the lady official. Once again we are astounded by the total lack of discipline. We find ourselves in a carriage with several young Europeans: a French couple, a Swedish couple, a Dutch couple, and a Danish couple whom we have met at Kumbum. The rest of the carriage consists of boisterous Chinese people.

The train sets off at 7.45 a.m. at a nice easy pace. No wonder it is referred to as a 'slow' train: it stops at almost every station. None the less, the journey is pleasant and there is an agreeable atmosphere in the carriage. The scenery becomes very interesting; I spend most of the time looking out the window at the ever-changing landscape of fields and mountains. It is very obvious that this is not typical Chinese scenery. We have left the mist and energy-sapping heat behind; here the sky is blue and the air is fresh and invigorating. Indeed, we now have to keep the windows closed most of the time as it is becoming cooler. The people in this region are colourfully dressed and look Tibetan. Gradually the green fields disappear and the scenery becomes stark and dramatic.

At around lunchtime we approach Qinghai lake: a massive deep blue salt-water lake that looks more like an inland sea; never have I seen such intense blue water before. Out come the cameras. As we stop at a few stations for quite some time, we manage to leave the carriage and take a short walk. Traders sell food and drinks, and raucous music plays from loudspeakers – no doubt this is the authorities' method of reminding everyone that we are still in the People's Republic of China. The villages and towns look most uninspiring, though the scenery is magnificent. We are certainly glad that we have taken this overland route, even though it is a long journey. Our Chinese friend leaves us at a station soon after the lake.

Towards evening, we stop at a place named Ke-ke, which is in the middle of nowhere. Here we walk up and down the platform and buy provisions for the bus journey. Later, several people go to the restaurant car for a meal and discover that the prices are outrageous. The staff are exceptionally rude and indolent; earlier I had asked for boiling water and could not return to our carriage because the door had been locked behind me. In the meantime some ladies had arrived and were banging on the door to be let in. The staff thought that this was a great joke. Finally some water was fetched from the kitchen and the door was opened.

When it suits the kitchen staff, tickets for an evening meal are distributed. As this is reasonably priced, everyone makes a dash for the restaurant car and sits down to a good meal at last. The rest of the evening passes uneventfully and we prepare for bed. Although I am tired, I am unable to sleep on the top bunk as it is hot and claustrophobic. I spend most of the night tossing and turning. I hope that I will be able to sleep on the bus tomorrow night.

The train pulls into Golmud station (or Ge'ermu as the Chinese call it) at around eight this morning. Daniel and I have no idea what will happen next, but we do not need to worry, for outside the main entrance we find several buses parked and the drivers shouting, 'Lhasa! Lhasa!'. Delighted, we board one of the new Japanese buses, only to discover that it will not be leaving until tomorrow evening. Disgusted, we leave and make our way over to the older Chinese buses, three of which are leaving



immediately. There will be no overnight stop, and the journey will take twenty-four hours. Although we know that this will be an exhausting trip, we decide to travel now rather than waste time and stay in this god-forsaken, ugly city in the middle of nowhere.



*The bus for the journey to Lhasa*

We join a few people who clamber aboard one of the buses and we are driven along empty wide streets to the bus station, where we buy tickets for 59.50 RMB (about £8 and, again, cheaper than my first taxi ride in Beijing). We have to wait about two hours here (so much for 'immediately'), during which we buy more provisions and luggage is transferred from another bus. More passengers arrive and we set off at 10.30. The back of the bus is full of dirty but colourfully-dressed Tibetans who laugh and sing at the top of their voices. They are obviously delighted to be travelling home. The bus is full and I find myself sitting beside the young Swedish couple.

At last we leave Golmud behind and find ourselves in the great open spaces of the high Qinghai plateau. At last we are definitely on our way to Lhasa, the famous holy city of Tibet.